

GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY ARTIST ANALYSIS ARCHIVE PROJECT

WU TIEN-CHANG: ART OF THE TAIWANESE TRANSFORMATION

STEPHANIE SWART, PHOTOGRAPHY & MEDIA ART, 2021



Wu Tien-chang, *Our Hearts Beat as One* (2001-15), light-box print,
<https://www.tkgplus.com/artists/26-/works/9473-2001/>

This short art analysis paper accompanies an original video presentation produced by UTC undergraduate students, dedicated to the work of a contemporary artist and developed as part of ART 4190r: Global Contemporary Art course in Spring 2021.

Biography

Mixed media artist Wu Tien-chang was born in 1956 in Changhua, Taiwan. Having grown up under an authoritarian rule and witnessing the transition to democracy, he uses socio-political policy as the subject of critique in his work. He grew up by the Keelung Harbor, a popular port where U.S. sailors would pass through and interact with the locals. Throughout his childhood, there was heavy censorship in Taiwan under martial law until it was lifted in 1987, so any kind of art that questioned the government was not readily accessible. Tien-chang earned his Bachelor of Fine Art from Chinese Cultural University in 1980 and went on to create artwork in the mediums spanning from oil painting to photography and video. His passion for production value is evident in his intricately designed sets for his photographs and video work. His roots in painting shine through in his work; from backdrop, to color and costume, everything is intentionally composed and lit.

Surrealism meets performance in Tien-chang's body of work. He uses his childhood memories as a means to create fantastical scenarios of Taiwanese city and landscapes meshed with the post-War evolving of culture in a time of Westernization. His work aims to critique political and social hypocrisy he has witnessed in Taiwan through theatrics and sophisticated digital technology, while also recognizing the spirit of Taiwan and its unique aesthetic.

Taiwan experienced authoritarian rule until 1987, and until then, experienced martial law for nearly 40 years. Art experienced extreme censorship, especially politically charged artwork. Wu Tien-chang grew up in the midst of political strictness, patriarchy and limitations, yet prevailed during adulthood in his artistic endeavors. Prior to the 1987 ending of martial law, Taiwan experienced a shifting from “hard” to “soft” authoritarian rule. This entailed a move from “mainlander-technocratic rule under one-man dictatorship” to “joint mainlander-Taiwanese technocratic rule under collective leaders.”¹ As Tien-chang entered adulthood, he was able to make artwork involving political commentary during this monumental shift towards a liberated society in the mid-1990s. On a global scale, “the number of democratic nations had surpassed the number of non-democratic societies in the world for the first time in human history.”² Thanks to the shifting rule of Taiwan, Tien-chang makes whimsical, yet haunting work inspired by his childhood experiences and the history of Taiwanese culture and government.

As a child, “his father painted movie posters and his mother sold movie tickets. He was reared on film characters, medicine men performers, and Taoist gods.”³ He witnessed a “rigidly patriarchal” society and abuse towards the women in his family, but he maintained a deep respect for the women in his life.⁴ The production of his video work, and sometimes his photography, requires a team of crew members working at the level equal to that of a movie. The process of much of his photography involves “taking 50 to 100 shots to create his composition, which he

¹ Edwin A. Winckler, "Institutionalization and Participation on Taiwan: From Hard to Soft Authoritarianism?" *The China Quarterly*, no. 99 (1984), 482, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/653238>.

² Liqun Cao, Lanying Huang, and Ivan Y. Sun, *Policing in Taiwan: from Authoritarianism to Democracy* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 1.

³ Joan Lebold Cohen, "Art and Politics in China and Taiwan: Ai Weiwei and Wu Tien-Chang," *Modern China Studies* 18, no. 2 (2011), 92. <https://proxy.lib.utc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.utc.edu/scholarly-journals/art-politics-china-taiwan-ai-weiwei-wu-tien-chang/docview/900317605/se-2?accountid=14767>.

⁴ Cohen, "Art and Politics in China and Taiwan: Ai Weiwei and Wu Tien-Chang," 91.

then manipulates using a highly sophisticated computer technology.”⁵ His tedious process on set results in vibrant, painterly images that lead the viewer to question the medium.

His video piece, *Farewell, Spring and Autumn Pavilions* (2015), utilizes the imagery of the U.S. military branches. The one continuous shot film begins with a U.S. sailor carrying a guitar, who begins to march to the beat of a folk-y song as a conveyor belt moves him along a backdrop of a shipping port. He then, almost magically, changes into a feminine soldier. The figure is now more doll-like, and this appearance could be interpreted as having underlying commentary on the fetishization of Asian women. This work is made with themes of Westernization in mind and could be resembling of the idea that “Asian women are continually paired with the White male and prohibited from falling in love with the Asian male character.” Tien-chang witnessed the common occurrences of U.S. soldiers gravitating towards Asian prostitutes at the Keelung Harbor, in turn, his work may be commenting on a stereotype “indicating that only the White male has the capability to protect the Asian female from potential harm.”⁶ The intersection of a male figure, covered in doll-like latex and makeup, brings to life a fantastical version of Tien-chang’s childhood memories.

Tien-chang explains his attraction to such imagery, “You could call it a fetish. I’m always stirred by sailor’s uniforms because I grew up in Keelung. On the right side of the alley of my home, where traditional brothels are located, on the left side was a new business, that is bars. When the 7th Fleet from the U.S. was stationed in Keelung Harbor when I was little, I saw U.S. Sailors everywhere walking in the streets with their arms around bar girls’ waists. Taiwan was

⁵ Cohen, “Art and Politics in China and Taiwan: Ai Weiwei and Wu Tien-Chang,” 96.

⁶ Murali Balaji, Tina Worawongs, The New Suzie Wong: Normative Assumptions of White Male and Asian Female Relationships, *Communication, Culture and Critique*, Volume 3, Issue 2, June 2010, 228–229, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2010.01068.x>

like a third world country then. When a kid said hello to them, they throw you some candy. I used to follow westerners around all the time.”⁷ He furthers this idea of fetishism in his use of latex skin covering the actors face and any exposed skin. The actors are transformed into an artificial being, one that mimics Tien-chang’s idea of fakeness and alternative cultures. He expresses how Taiwan is made up of alternative cultures because of its changing political structure and relationship with China. The act of wearing a latex skin, is similar to the act of masking oneself from their true identity. With all of the varying cultures, Taiwan does not have a singular cultural identity for people to resonate with. His work can be described as “an echo of Taiwan’s search for its own identity.”⁸ This piece, along with a collection of his other work, was featured in the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, in a solo exhibition called, “Never Say Goodbye.”

His photographic piece, *Our Hearts Beat as One* (2001-15) is similar to *Farewell, Spring and Autumn Pavilions*, “set in classically composed arrangements that are voluptuous and compelling, although specifically ambiguous. They are outspoken in a theatrically absurd form that suggests the antics of political and social life.”⁹ A set of male masked twins sit upon a tandem bike. This narrative is based upon a fable about brothers who killed each other during a fight over a woman. Karma reincarnated them into identical twins missing arms and legs, and who now must work together to operate a tandem bike. This may serve as “an allegory for mainland-Taiwan relations.”¹⁰ Tien-chang’s upbringing around movies may have played a role in the decision of the painted white masks with red cheeks, because it has a resemblance to the

⁷ Wu Tien-Chang: *Farewell, Spring and Autumn Pavilions. Exhibitions & Pavilions, 56th Venice Biennale 2015* (Universes in Universe - Worlds of Art, 2015), <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2015/tour/taiwan/16>.

⁸ “Wu Tien-Chang: Artist Profile, Exhibitions & Artworks,” Ocula, <https://ocula.com/artists/wu-tien-chang/>.

⁹ Yali Chen, “Wu Tien-Chang's Digital Artworks Seek the Essence of Taiwan's Soul,” Taiwan News (Taiwan News, July 24, 2016), <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/en/news/1485915>.

¹⁰ H. G. Masters, “Variations on a Theme,” *Art AsiaPacific Almanac*, 2016, 4, <https://proxy.lib.utc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.lib.utc.edu/magazines/variations-on-theme/docview/2223950212/se-2?accountid=14767>.

“makeup commonly used for zombies in Hong Kong-based horror movies during the 1980s.”¹¹

This piece incorporates not only ideas of karma and Buddhism, a major religion of Taiwan, but also symbols of Tien-chang’s upbringing.

In both pieces, he is focusing on the Taiwanese identity and the impacts on the post-colonial country. Tien-chang stated in an interview, “Maternal culture and the belief in life of Taiwanese people are the main inspirations of my creativity. I hope to create a powerful visual impact with Taiwan’s highly recognisable unique visual aesthetics and universal humane spirit to break the barriers between ethnicities and countries.”¹² Taiwan has experienced a disconnect with outside countries after being strictly run for decades. This work serves as a way to explore Taiwan’s struggle with a fragmented culture, through the use of “vibrant baroque aesthetic that is reminiscent of Taiwan’s post-war period in which the country began a process of Westernisation.”¹³ This subject matter can also be looked at in dialogue with Homi Bhabha’s chapter, “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern” from his book, *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha’s writing discusses the duality of a pre- and post-colonized cultural identity. The suffering of those who came before in a particular place leads to new ideas, identities and strategies. Such suffering “forces us to confront the concept of culture outside or beyond the canonization of the ‘idea’ of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival.”¹⁴ Tien-chang’s work keeps up with social survival, as he

¹¹ Chen, “Wu Tien-Chang’s Digital Artworks Seek the Essence of Taiwan’s Soul.”

¹² “Taiwanese Artist Wu Tien-Chang at Festival of New Media Art MADATAC 08, Madrid,” *Art Radar Journal*, January 21, 2017, pp. 96, <https://doi.org/https://madatac.es/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/CLIPPING-MADATAC-08.pdf>.

¹³ *Art Radar Journal*, “Taiwanese Artist Wu Tien-Chang at Festival of New Media Art MADATAC 08, Madrid,” 92.

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, “The Postcolonial and the Postmodern,” in *The Location of Culture* (Psychology Press, 2004), 172.

changes his methods of practice every ten years. His body of work reflects the unevenness of culture and its ever-morphing qualities brought upon by Taiwan's complicated history.

The latex covered figures of Wu Tien-chang's work must continue to morph into new identities and skins, and the twins must work together to move forward both literally on the tandem bike, and metaphorically through life. His work presents challenges of production and narrative, and ultimately strives to recognize the impact Taiwan's history has had on its people.

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